

Assassination Panel Goal:

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

The cramped, three-room suite is deceptively modest. The staff already numbers 35 people but, luckily, they have yet to show up for work all at once.

Some of them are in Mexico City, looking for memories of Lee Harvey Oswald. Others have been in Memphis, tracking down records on Martin Luther King.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations is evidently anxious to make a quick start. It was created less than three months ago. Its members will meet Thursday to discuss a two-year inquiry that is expected to cost approximately \$5 million.

It could be the single most expensive investigation in congressional history, but its proponents argue that it ought to be done thoroughly and professionally or not at all. The trails behind the murders of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King will not be easily picked up again.

The chief exponent, and director, of the investigations is the committee's chief counsel, Richard A. Sprague, a longtime prosecutor from Philadelphia with a remarkable record of success.

He has tried more than 70 first-degree murder cases and "lost" only one. A resourceful advocate, he has even prosecuted cases of corruption where no laws existed, convicting one Pennsylvania magistrate under "an old English concept that I dug up—oppression in office." The novel charge was applied to the magistrate's connection with a collection agency that kept bringing debtors before him for summary justice.

"The courts upheld us," Sprague says proudly. "He went to jail."

For the present inquiry, Sprague, 51, brings only his tools. When he took the assignment, he says, he knew next to nothing about the assassinations of either Kennedy or King. He has, he insists, no preconceived notions about whether either one was the victim of a conspiracy.

For instance, he says, he worked for years under Arlen Specter, former

Philadelphia district attorney and onetime Warren Commission lawyer who authored the "single-bullet theory"—which holds that both Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally were wounded, at one point, by the same shot from Oswald's rifle. It is one of the most controversial findings of the Warren report. Yet Sprague says he never once discussed it with his former boss.

There are those who are still unimpressed. "I say he's got a conflict of interest," protests Harold Weisberg, author of "Whitewash" and other attacks on the Warren report. "It is not possible to investigate the Kennedy assassination without investigating Arlen Specter."

Other assassination buffs, by contrast, are happy to see Sprague on the job. It even appears that one of them, Mark Lane, author of "Rush to Judgment," may have been the first to broach Sprague's name to the House committee.

Acting as a sort of self-appointed talent scout "without portfolio," Lane says he sounded out the veteran prosecutor about the job and commended him to the office of Rep. Thomas Downing (D-Va.), the committee chairman, as well as to others.

Sprague has had little to say about all these goings-on except to state that he intends to be his own man. For instance, he says, he insisted on "the absolute right of hiring and firing" committee staffers. He also demanded to be named not only chief counsel but also staff director, so he could make sure the investigation is "thoroughly impartial" and proceeds "in a professional manner."

Such prerogatives have, by all accounts, been firmly promised to Sprague, both by Downing, who is leaving the House, and by Rep. Henry B. Gonzalez (D-Tex.), who is expected to be the next chairman. It remains to be seen whether Sprague's insistence on being in charge of the show is compatible, in the long run, with continued employment by a congressional committee.

All sides profess to be optimistic, at least for now. Rep. Richardson Preyer

(D-N.C.), who will head the subcommittee investigating the Kennedy assassination, says the goal is nothing less than a "definitive report" that will resolve all the nagging doubts and questions about the Warren Commission's work. A former federal judge and one of the most respected members of the House, Preyer adds that he has been highly impressed by Sprague.

"I think Sprague is a remarkably fair-minded and tough-minded investigator," Preyer says.

He also has a touch of flamboyance. As a prosecutor in Philadelphia, he drove around in a bulletproof, city-owned Chrysler New Yorker with telephone, radio and police siren. He used to park it on the sidewalk outside city hall.

With a rumpled, expressive face that reminds some of a bloodhound, Sprague was best known nationally as special prosecutor in the Yablonski murders, which were finally traced to former United Mine Workers president W. A. (Tony) Boyle. But in Philadelphia, there are plenty of other cases to remember him by.

One of them was the "case of the missing body," a long-ago murder without a corpus delicti. The victim, a meticulous woman, had disappeared without a trace, but she left everything behind, even her bridgework. Sprague built a circumstantial case against her common-law husband, who had reportedly acknowledged to friends that he carved the victim up and left her remains for the garbage man.

"Sprague had a beautiful case made out," recalls A. J. Brem Levy, the defense lawyer who tilted with him at the 1961 trial. "I remember going before the jury and emphasizing how they never found her body. I said, 'My goodness gracious, she could come walking through that door any second now.'"

"Everyone on the jury turned and looked to the door," Levy says. "But Sprague didn't look. He got up and said, 'I didn't look—and the defendant didn't look because he knew she wasn't going to show up.' He's a magnificent courtroom advocate. . . . When

Thoroughness

he gets into something, it's prepared to the queen's taste."

A firm believer in capital punishment who has obtained the death penalty more than 20 times (one, Frank McCoy, was executed), Sprague is no darling of the liberals in the City of Brotherly Love, but that doesn't bother people like Washington lawyer Joseph L. Raub Jr., whose liberal credentials are not open to question. He met Sprague during the Yablonski investigations and counts him as "one of my dearest friends."

In his new role as congressional committee counsel, Sprague's first major chore will be not in solving any murders, but in convincing the House that the effort needs, and is worth, a staff of 170 people for an inquiry that could last two years but is eschewing any deadlines at all.

So far, Sprague says, he's been making good headway. He points out that the Warren Commission had more than 300 full-time people, including FBI, Secret Service and CIA details, assigned to it. The House investigation, he add, must cover two assassinations without relying on the government agencies whose shortcomings and mistreatment of evidence led to creation of the select committee.

Even so, the \$2.5-million-a-year price tag is five times higher than the House was initially led to expect. The committee has already hired more staff than its preliminary \$150,000 budget called for. And it is faced with the task of writing a persuasive enough report, perhaps including some compelling evidence, to convince the House to keep on going.

Despite the all-or-nothing theme, Sprague refuses to say what he would do if the committee is cut back to a point where it feels it cannot conduct a thorough set of investigations. But Preyer, for one, seems ready to bite the bullet.

"If it's cut way back, my feeling would be that we just shouldn't do it," he says. "We shouldn't do it just for appearance's sake. We want to do something the House can take pride in, like the impeachment inquiry. If we can't do it that way, I think we ought to just leave it alone."